



*United States Post Office 1936
Destined for demolition*

The act of tearing it down pitted the Central Labor Union, who favored new jobs, against preservationists, who wanted to retain one of the city's premier architectural gems. The library Board of Trustees and many citizens wanted to build a new post office and convert the old one into a first rate library.

The final decision favored demolition.

Slow Progress

In the 1936-37 fiscal year, library funding climbed to \$4900 per year—\$4000 from the city and \$900 from the county. The North Carolina State Library Commission sent the state's first book truck (the forerunner of the bookmobile) for a 30-day demonstration in New Hanover County.

The library board wanted to purchase a similar truck; but the county refused to fund it, saying that New Hanover County was so small that it was no hardship for residents to visit the downtown library.

Hopes Raised

In 1938, the city public works office applied for a PWA Grant. Funds were sought for twenty projects including: renovating City Hall; extending sewers; improving streets; building new sidewalks; installing metal street signs; remodeling the City Market; extending the fire and police alarm system; adding new water works; buying land for new parks, playgrounds and athletic fields; constructing a city auditorium for conventions and municipal uses; and building a new public library.

The Bridgers House (now the Graystone Inn), located on the northwest corner of Dock and Third streets was for sale, and many thought it would make a fine public library. Others felt that it was in a poor location and that renovating it as a library would cost as much as constructing a new building. It was decided that the location of a new library facility could wait until after the bond referendum.

Either way, library supporters were enthusiastically willing to vote YES.

Progress Blocked

The PWA was prepared to provide 55% of the funding if the city would pay for the remainder. Accordingly, the city held a bond referendum in August, 1938. The bond was approved overwhelmingly, but a group of concerned

taxpayers decided to contest the outcome. They contended that the city auditorium, parks, playgrounds, athletic fields and public library were not public "necessities" and should be excluded from public works funding.

The legal dispute eventually reached the North Carolina Supreme Court, which ruled that while the law required only a majority of those who voted to pass the bond referendum for "necessary" public works, it required a majority of *registered* voters to pass a bond to build the auditorium, parks, playgrounds, athletic fields and public library.

Back to the Drawing Board

With all hopes and votes for a new library defeated, the Wilmington Public Library had to remain on the third floor of City Hall. PWA and bond funds allowed for building renovations, and the work began in earnest.

The library was temporarily moved to the Woolvin Building at 225 Princess Street. Citizens helped by checking out as many books as possible to lighten the load. A record 617 books were checked out in one day during the move.

Disaster Strikes



*North wall of
City Hall
collapses
Jan. 16, 1939*

On January 16, 1939, the north side of the City Hall wall crumbled. The afternoon newspaper reported, "Five workmen narrowly escaped death about two o'clock this afternoon when the north front wing of the old city hall building collapsed. With a roar that could be heard for several blocks, a section about 40 feet high and 30 feet wide suddenly crumbled and sent bricks hurtling over the north driveway."

With City Hall unsafe, there was a movement to tear the grand old building down. Engineers from across the state declared that it was too far-gone to repair, but a group of citizens led by developer Hugh MacRae questioned their findings.

They felt that the building was an important component of the city's history and that it had been built with great skill in 1856. A new building was refused and City Hall underwent massive renovations.

Steel beams were added to the building. The library's wooden floor was replaced by cement, and Thalian Hall was given a gracious facelift. In December 1940, the library moved back into City Hall with all new steel shelving. It remained there for another sixteen years.

At the end of 1941, attention turned to a new topic as the United States entered World War II.



*Third floor City Hall, December 1940
New steel shelves*